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Ignoring Contadora Defeats Our Purposes

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The United States has critical national interests at stake in Central America—fundamentally, the achievement of peace, stability and democracy in the region. This cannot be achieved unilaterally, yet we are increasingly becoming isolated from friends in Latin America who share our goal.

Earlier this year, representatives of Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Panama met on Panama's Contadora Island to initiate a multilateral peace process. We have just returned from meeting with key officials in each of these democracies. While we are greatly impressed with the progress that they have achieved, we also are alarmed at the negative effect that Reagan Administration actions have had in systematically undermining the Contadora Group's efforts.

Contadora has already produced not only the general framework but also specific proposals that could bring peace to the region. The participants have pursued commitments to halt foreign arms supply, withdraw foreign military advisers, secure free elections, promote regional economic development and bar the use of one nation's territory for attacks on neighboring countries. In the process, four key U.S. objectives have been advanced:

- Regional leadership has emerged as an alternative to the U.S. interventionism that historically has set back our interests in Latin America.

- Traditional enemies in the region are cooperating to engage in a dialogue for comprehensive regional peace.

- Nicaragua's Sandinista regime has

embraced the idea of a multilateral peace negotiation.

—Fidel Castro has shown a willingness to make compromises that would facilitate Cuba's reentry into the Latin American family of nations.

Despite these substantial developments, the Contadora process is suffering.

It is suffering from serious neglect by the Reagan Administration. When pressed, Administration officials pay lip service to the regional peace effort. Yet President Reagan ignored Contadora in his post-summit comments in Mexico this month, just as he ignored it in his address to Congress in April.

Contadora is suffering from U.S. attempts to pressure Nicaragua with a show of force. Just 24 hours after the Contadora nations' presidents proposed a 10-point peace plan, the Reagan Administration announced the deployment of the largest U.S. flotilla ever to sail Latin waters, as well as plans to land up to 5,600 U.S. troops in Honduras for "military exercises." One Contadora president told us that when he heard the news from Washington, he was convinced that Castro's agents had infiltrated the State Department, for the move could only stir up tremendous anti-American sentiment and solidify support for those whom it was designed to intimidate. The Contadora leaders, who share U.S. aspirations for democracy in the region, repeatedly expressed dismay that the Reagan Administration's rhetoric of peace is consistently contradicted by its military actions.

And Contadora efforts are suffering from the CIA-funded "covert" war against the Sandinistas. This hapless venture is seen as counterproductive by virtually every Contadora leader. U.S. backing of the universally hated remnants of Anastasio Somoza's National Guard justifies the Sandinistas' otherwise unjustified military buildup, and undermines efforts of democratic opponents to focus attention on the Sandinistas' betrayal of pledges for a free press and free elections.

The leadership of the Contadora nations offers the best means to achieve U.S. goals in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and to secure the imperiled democracies of Honduras and Costa Rica. The Contadora nations, which face a far more immediate threat than we do if the gathering storm erupts, are united in agreement that an essential step is dialogue between the United States and Cuba. While diplomatically necessary, such a dialogue has been blocked for reasons of domestic U.S. politics. With the Contadora process, our government has a framework for pursuing discussions that we can no longer afford to shun.

The United States must now demonstrate political maturity. We should withdraw our naval flotilla; stop CIA funding of the war against the Sandinistas; prepare to join Contadora parties in a dialogue with Cuba; press for secure, internationally supervised elections in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, and advance a package of development assistance and debt refinancing for Central American nations.

Instead of the Reagan Administration paying lip service to the Contadora peace process, it should undertake these specific steps, giving Contadora the unequivocal support that it must have if long-term U.S. national interests are to be secured.

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